

# "The Enemy Is Listening!"

## What Did the British Intelligence Service Know about the Holocaust?

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In his book, *The Ultra Secret*, [1] published in 1974, author Frederick W. Winterbotham revealed, for the first time, that the British Intelligence Service was able to eavesdrop on almost all German military radio communications from a very early date, shortly after the outbreak of World War II. As a captain in the Royal Air Force and officer of the Military Intelligence Service, Winterbotham supervised the work of the Government Code & Cipher School in Bletchley Park, where cryptanalysts cracked the "Enigma" code used in German cipher machines to scramble messages transmitted by the German army, navy and air force.

Seven more years were fated to pass by before the public was permitted to learn that Bletchley Park personnel were capable of far more than simply reading written German military messages. In 1981, cryptanalyst Francis H. Hinsley published the second volume of his book *British Intelligence in the Second World War*. [2] Hinsley's book revealed that the British Intelligence Service also eavesdropped on radio signals transmitted by the German police, SD and SS. This enabled the British to obtain not only reliable information on events behind the Russian Front, but on events in the German concentration camps as well.

On 19 May 1997, the British government transferred the decoded documents in Bletchley Park to the Public Records Office in London, thereby making them accessible to the public for research purposes. [3] Oddly, only a very few Holocaust historians were interested in the information on the concentration camps. The reason for this astonishing lack of interest is presumably due to the following remark by author Hinsley:

*The messages from Auschwitz, the largest camp, with 20,000 inmates, [4] mention disease as the chief cause of death, but also include references to executions by hanging and shooting. The decoded messages contain no references to gassings. [5]*

The present article is intended to summarize the information obtained at Bletchley Park on events in Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Despite Hinsley's unambiguous statement, British Intelligence Service information continues to give rise to a multiplicity of interpretations and speculation, just as before. At the same time, the question of what the British "knew about the Holocaust" always takes priority over everything else.

As shown by the Bletchley Park documents, the commandant of Auschwitz had to file a report every single day. With the exception of Sunday, these messages consisted of daily reports on population [*Bestand*], arrivals [*Zugänge*], and departures [*Abgänge*] from the concentration camps. For over thirteen months, from January 1942 to January 1943, the British Intelligence Service followed up and decoded these reports from Auschwitz Concentration Camp to the SS Head Business Administration Office [*SS-Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt*] in Oranienburg.

The decoded messages enabled the compilation of very exact statistics. The radio messages from 28 October 1942 – taking a single day at random – reveal, for example, that Auschwitz Concentration Camp contained a total, all told, of 25,298 inmates: 18,754 men and 6,544 women; including 10,755 Jews,

8,822 Poles, 1,369 Russians and 1,578 Germans. It was also learned that there were exactly 787 *Zugänge* and 168 *Abgänge* on 28 July 1942; *Zugänge* referred to the arrival of new inmates; *Abgänge* referred to deaths, executions, releases and inmates transferred to other camps.

These daily radio messages also contained additional information related to Auschwitz. Thus, it was reported, for example, that Jewish watchmakers were being transferred to Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp; that Polish workers could only be sent elsewhere [*verschickt*] after release from quarantine; that British POWs were considered to be urgently needed to work as *kapos*; and that efforts were being made to locate a successor to the then-acting garrison doctor by September 1942.

With regard to the Holocaust, the *Abgänge* were naturally of particular interest. In actual fact, the monthly number of *Abgänge* in the year 1942 fluctuated in an unusual manner. While the number of *Abgänge* normally amounted to approximately 2,000 inmates per month, there was a great increase in these figures in July, August, September and October. For example, 8,352 *Abgänge* were reported for the month of August 1942.

As is readily apparent from the radio messages, this unusually high number of *Abgänge* was due to a typhus epidemic at Auschwitz.[6] Typhus, sometimes also known as “camp fever” is, as is well known, transmitted by fleas and lice; under poor hygienic circumstances it will inevitably appear in almost any such camp. According to the decoded radio messages, it took the Auschwitz authorities approximately four months to bring the epidemic under control. The numbers only fell back down to the average figure of approximately 2,000 *Abgänge* per month in November and December 1942.



*Dr. Eduard Wirths, Chief SS doctor (SS-Standortarzt) at the Auschwitz concentration camp from September 1942 to January 1945. Wirths is third from right in front row*

By Jesse Hofseth (Own work) [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

Auschwitz Concentration Camp, as mentioned above, had requested a successor to their current on-duty garrison physician in August 1942. This successor, who took over in his official capacity on 6 September 1942, was Dr. Eduard Wirths. In his notes, Wirths left a vivid report on conditions in Auschwitz at that time:[7]

*I found inconceivable inmate conditions. There was no running water, no working toilets, no way to bathe. The barracks lodging the prisoners were overfilled and there was a shortage of beds. There were masses of lice all over the floors, clothing and inmates' bodies. The walls were black with fleas. The condition of the inmates was simply unbelievable, emaciated to their very bones, devoured by vermin, with dead bodies lying around between living inmates. Hundreds of dying inmates were taken away, but sometimes they lay around among the living for days.*

It was obvious that the epidemic would spread to the guard personnel as well. The Bletchley Park intercepts reported, for example, that, on 4 September “the entire camp was subjected to quarantine”[8] and “in October, 11 SS-Men were hospitalized with suspected typhus.”[9]

Wirths succeeded temporarily in bringing the epidemic under control by building additional barracks, infirmaries, installing additional drains and water pipes, latrines and targeted use of measures intended to combat infection:

*Through the chamber of physicians [Ärzttekammer], we applied for permission to distribute white bread and milk. Instead of polluted drinking water, I took care to distribute drinks such as coffee and tea. I ordered the organization of field kitchens for working inmates, due to the great distances between the worksites and their living quarters and commissaries, which meant that otherwise the workers would get no hot food all day. When the construction of field kitchens was impracticable, I had hot food delivered to the work sites by vehicle. I requested permission to allow recovering inmates to gather wild vegetables, medicinal herbs. At the same time, I wanted Jewish women confined by the camp administration to be able to move about in the open. I requested rest for physically weakened inmates, even the construction of entire rest departments.[10]*

Dr. Wirths’s struggle against the epidemics must have been a real labor of Sisyphus. Obviously, fresh cases of typhus arrived in the camp with each new rail transport. Thus, on 28 January 1943, Bletchley Park issued a report to the effect that “there were 36 cases of typhus among the inmates arriving on 22 January.”[11]

In the summer of 1942, the first Polish and Jewish reports appeared[12] alleging the commission of mass murder on an industrial scale in Auschwitz. According to these reports, 2,000 inmates were being killed in gas chambers every day. Since the number of *Abgänge* reported amounted to approximately 2,000 inmates per month, and not 2,000 inmates per day, the British Intelligence Service rejected these reports as war propaganda. Thus, the president of the British Joint Intelligence Committee, Victor Cavendish-Bentinck, on 27 August 1943, wrote that the reports from Poles and Jews were devoid of all basis in fact:[13]

*The allegations of mass executions in gas chambers are reminiscent of the atrocity stories from the last war, according to which the Germans were processing corpses into fat – a grotesque lie, which was immediately unmasked as pure propaganda.*

The first historian ever permitted to examine the deciphered messages from Bletchley Park was Richard Breitman. In his book, *Official Secrets: What the Nazis Planned, What the British and Americans Knew*, [14] published in 1998, Breitman made serious accusations against the Allies. As indicated in the translation back to English of the German translation of his book – *State Secrets: Nazi Crimes Tolerated by the Allies [Staatsgeheimnisse: Die Verbrechen der Nazis – von den Alliierten toleriert]*, he accuses the British and Americans of having known about the Holocaust from the very beginning, but of deliberately concealing this information. In particular, he accused Cavendish-Bentinck of rejecting the “Information from Polish and Jewish sources as invented.” [15] This accusation is, however, entirely unjustified. Why should Cavendish-Bentinck have accorded credibility to unreliable reports when he was in possession of reliable radio messages from Auschwitz itself?

That Cavendish-Bentinck rejected the credibility of reports from Polish and Jewish underground sources is all the more understandable when one reads some of the documents cited by Breitman. Thus, for example, he reports that “a Polish underground courier who had succeeded in escaping to London” had made the following statements on Auschwitz Concentration Camp: [16]

*I lived a few weeks in Auschwitz. [...] Based on the information which I gathered, together with my own observations, I can assure you that the Germans used the following killing methods. A) Gas chambers: the victims were forced naked into the chambers, where they suffocated. B) Electrical chambers: these chambers had metal walls. The victims were driven inside and then killed by high-voltage electrical current. C) The so-called pneumatic hammer system: a pneumatic hammer designed to kill by means of pneumatic pressure.*

Is it really so remarkable that Cavendish-Bentinck considered such reports unworthy of belief? Obviously not. Any similar report would be immediately rejected as false, even today.

But there is more: According to information provided by “a Polish woman with the code name Wanda,” “98% of all arrivals at Auschwitz were gassed.” [17] Auschwitz was a forced-labor camp suffering from a severe shortage of manpower, as the officials at Bletchley Park well knew. Why should Cavendish-Bentinck lend the slightest credence to the allegation that 98% of all inmates were gassed immediately after their arrival?

The British Intelligence Service had every reason to consider the decoded radio messages of the SS the most reliable source of information on events in Auschwitz. In view of the available data, it was, therefore, furthermore assumed that the local mortality rates amounted to approximately 2,000 per month, instead of 2,000 per day. According to the figures reported by the SS, there were exactly 52,996 *Abgänge* in the entire year of 1942. The unusually high number is, as stated above, attributable to the series of typhus epidemics which can easily be proven to have broken out in the late summer of 1942. If there had been 2,000 deaths per day in 1942, the number of *Abgänge* would have amounted to at least 730,000.

The figures decoded in Bletchley Park obviously caused confusion among historians. The official number of Auschwitz victims amounts, as is well known, to 1 million. But how is it possible to arrive at such a high figure based on the SS radio messages deciphered by the British Intelligence Service?



Bundesarchiv - Bild 1011-241-2173-09  
Foto: Grupp | 1943/1944

*Encryption device Enigma in use, 1943.*

*Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-241-2173-09 / Grupp / CC-BY-SA 3.0 [CC BY-SA 3.0 de (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/deed.en>)], via Wikimedia Commons*

In an attempt to shore up the official figure of Auschwitz victims, Breitman claims that the number of actual victims were subject to particularly severe measures of official censorship and confidentiality when reported by radio:[\[18\]](#)

*Strict secrecy was still maintained within the SS, regardless of Enigma. Top secret information was still transmitted by courier only.*

This allegation is really not very convincing. Why should the mass gassings at Auschwitz not be reported through Enigma when the mass shootings on the Eastern Front were reported through Enigma, i.e., in precisely the same way? Regardless of whether it was a matter of mass executions in Riga, Minsk or Kiev – oddly, Breitman's book constantly proves its points based on the reports from Bletchley Park, which the author obviously considers reliable.

Just how arbitrary the above allegation by Breitman really is, is made clear, last but not least of all, by the fact that the Germans entrusted Enigma with information of crucial, even decisive, information on

their maneuvers, such as the current position of U-boats or the exact dates involved in future German air attacks.

Obviously less than completely convinced by his own arguments, Breitman resorts, only a few pages further on, to another explanation. Here, he states:[19]

*The statistics only include inmates who were registered in the Auschwitz camps.[...] The statistics nevertheless lack all mention of Jews who were selected for the gas chambers immediately after their arrival.*

What is the evidence for this assumption? As Breitman himself had already stated, "Himmler wanted to know how many inmates were released, and how many died, in each." [20] But if Himmler ordered the camps to report the number of deaths, why should the commandant of Auschwitz withhold this same number? Breitman's assumption appears to be a purely *ad hoc* hypothesis intended simply to enable the writer to continue clinging to the official number of victims at Auschwitz.

Another book on Bletchley Park and the Holocaust was published in 2004. Historian Nicholas Terry, in *Yad Vashem Studies*, published an article entitled "Conflicting Signals," [21] defended the British Intelligence Service against Richard Breitman's accusations: the British Intelligence Service had, in fact, according to him, discovered no clear evidence of extermination of Jews based on radio messages deciphered at Bletchley Park.

First of all, Terry straightens out a misunderstanding on Breitman's part. Of course, an order was, in fact, actually issued on 13 September 1941 prohibiting all further reporting of victim numbers by radio, but, rather, ordering that all such figures be communicated by courier only; but this order only applied to the three Higher SS and Police Leaders (*HSSPF*). [22] On 24 August 1941, Winston Churchill had made the mistake, in a radio address, of denouncing the mass shootings carried out behind the Russian front by the German *Ordnungspolizei* [*NS* regular police]. [23] Churchill's remarks remained, of course, very vague, but aroused the suspicion on the part of the head of the German *Ordnungspolizei*, Kurt Daluege, that the British had been eavesdropping on German radio reports. Daluege therefore issued an order to the heads of the *Ordnungspolizei*, deciphered by the British, prohibiting the mention, for the time being, of victim numbers by radio. In response to a suggestion by *SS-Obergruppenführer* Friedrich Jeckeln, the victim figures were not, however, deleted, but, rather, merely camouflaged, i.e., henceforth reported under the heading of "Action under the Customs of War." [24]

The decisive point is that the order issued by Daluege was addressed to the *HSSPF*, not the SS. The Auschwitz Commandant's office therefore continued to report its *Abgänge* on a regular basis. On 28 January 1943, Bletchley Park even reported that the Oranienburg office issued an order to compile detailed statistics and to report the exact numbers of deceased inmates and new arrivals. [25]

Like Richard Breitman, Nicholas Terry also alleges that the people murdered immediately after their arrival were not included in the lists of *Abgänge* because they were never registered, but were, instead, taken straight to the gas chambers. [26] This is, of course, entirely conceivable. But without a single document expressly ordering that inmates murdered in gas chambers directly after their arrival should *not* be reported, the assumption remains merely an *ad hoc* hypothesis.

That this *ad hoc* hypothesis is merely a far-fetched assumption is easily demonstrated by reference to a very few simple considerations. How was the *Reichsführer* SS supposed to know how the "Final Solution

to the Jewish Question" was progressing unless the commandant of Auschwitz regularly reported the fate of each individual incoming transport? It goes without saying that Himmler had to be informed of the numbers of inmates arriving at Auschwitz, being transferred to other concentration camps or being killed in the gas chambers. The SS Head Business Administration Office [*SS-Wirtschaft-Verwaltungshauptamt*] must have insisted upon exact statistics as well. Since it was responsible for all concentration camps, it would have needed to be informed, not only of the number of able-bodied, working inmates, but the number of unregistered, non-able-bodied inmates as well, even if only to justify the quantities of Zyklon B requested for the gas chambers as well as for the requested quantities of coke for the crematoria.

Altogether, it would be a gross underestimation of German bureaucracy to assume that exact records were not kept of every procedure. At Auschwitz, not a single birth, death, delousing, release, punishment, execution, case of illness or cremation could occur without being reported to Agency Group [*Amtsgruppe*] D of the *SS-WVHA* in Oranienburg by the camp commandant's office.

Finally, Jürgen Graf and Carlo Mattogno have discovered numerous documents in the Moscow archives illustrating not only the extent of German bureaucracy, but the unlikelihood of any Holocaust as well. As one example, I would like to cite the report from Dr. Horst Fischer to Dr. Eduard Wirths. In a letter dated 13 April 1943, the camp physician Dr. Fischer at Buna wrote to the garrison physician Dr. Wirths informing him of the arrival of 658 inmates at Auschwitz Camp. Of these 658 inmates, 109, after a thorough medical examination, were found to be unable to work. And of these 109 non-able-bodied inmates, 25 were sent to one of the rest and recovery wards at Buna, 33 were sent to the inmate infirmary at Buna, and 51 were transferred to the much better-equipped inmate hospital at Auschwitz I.

To sum up, the following facts may be considered established: The messages deciphered at Bletchley Park undoubtedly constitute one of the most reliable sources on the course of events during the Second World War. They provide information on undertakings of the German army, navy, and air force. They provide an insight into the events occurring behind the Russian front and the conditions in the concentration camps. Since the reports from Auschwitz contain no information on mass killings, the question of whether the British Intelligence Service "knew about the Holocaust," can be answered with a single word: "No!"[\[27\]](#)

In view of the fact that the messages from Auschwitz contain no mention of gas chambers or mass murders, the real question is: what was there really for anybody to "know" about? In other words: was there any Holocaust at all? Regardless of the general belief that hardly any historical event has ever been so thoroughly "proven," one must, once again, expressly point out that, until the present, not one single material or documentary proof for the reality of any mass killings in gas chambers has ever been found. The only thing that exists, at most, is mutually contradictory "eyewitness testimonies" and "confessions," which can, at least in the latter case, easily be shown to have been given under duress.

The most reliable documents on Auschwitz – the *Sterbebücher von Auschwitz*,[\[28\]](#) the *Kommandanturbefehle von Auschwitz*[\[29\]](#) and the "radio messages from Auschwitz, deciphered by the Allies"[\[30\]](#) – contain not the slightest reference to mass killings by means of toxic gas. This is in addition to the fact that the number of victims reported by the British Intelligence Service largely coincide with the numbers of victims reported in the Auschwitz "Death Books."

As already mentioned, Auschwitz Concentration Camp reported a total of 52,996 *Abgänge* for the year 1942 as a whole. According to the "Death Books," there are supposed to have been a total of 36,958 deaths at Auschwitz in 1942. The fact that the numbers of *Abgänge* is greater than the number of deaths, is easily explained, since the term *Abgänge* includes, as mentioned above, not only natural deaths and victims of execution, but also inmates who had been released or transferred elsewhere. It is therefore entirely conceivable that the number of 36,958 deaths given in the "Death Books" for the year 1942 is quite correct. The existing discrepancy of 16,038 could reflect the number of inmates transferred to other camps or released. Pending the discovery of a document unambiguously proving the gassing of thousands of human beings at Auschwitz by Zyklon B, we are perfectly justified in casting doubt upon the official version of the "Holocaust."

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#### Notes:

*Translated from German by Carlos W. Porter*

- [1] Frederick W. Winterbotham, *The Ultra Secret* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974).
- [2] Francis H. Hinsley *British Intelligence in the Second World War. Volume II: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations* (London: Stationary Books, 1981).
- [3] BBC Holocaust Documents Released. 20 May 1997.  
Online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/holocaust/5114.shtml>
- [4] The number of prisoners at Auschwitz grew continuously over the years. By 22 August 1944 the number of prisoners had grown to 104,891.
- [5] Francis H. Hinsley, *op. cit.*, p. 673.
- [6] Bletchley Park Summary Reports ZIP/OS1 of 21 August 1942.
- [7] Ulrich Völklein, *Dr. med. Eduard Wirths: Ein Arzt in Auschwitz. Eine Quellenedition* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2005), p. 40.
- [8] Bletchley Park Summary Reports ZIP/OS2 of 27 September 1942.
- [9] Bletchley Park Summary Reports ZIP/OS3 of 29 October 1942.
- [10] Ulrich Völklein, *op. cit.*, S. 42.
- [11] Bletchley Park Summary Reports ZIP/OS6 of 28 January 1943.
- [12] The first report of extermination of Jews was presented in the so-called "Riegner Telegram" of 8 August 1942. On 8 August 1942 the bureau chief of the Jewish World Congress in Geneva wrote to the governments in London and Washington that it had been decided in Berlin to "exterminate with one blow" all deported Jews.



- [13] Bletchley Park PRO FO 371/34551 of 27 August 1943.
- [14] Richard Breitman, *Official Secrets: What the Nazis Planned, What the British and Americans Knew* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998). All citations from this book are taken from the German translation.: Richard Breitman, *Staatsgeheimnisse: Die Verbrechen der Nazis – von den Alliierten toleriert* (Munich: Goldmann, 2001).
- [15] *Ibid*, p. 162.
- [16] *Ibid*, p. 160.
- [17] *Ibid*, p. 164.
- [18] *Ibid*, p. 154.
- [19] *Ibid*, p. 157.
- [20] *Ibid*, p. 156.
- [21] Nicholas Terry, "Conflicting Signals: British Intelligence on the 'Final Solution' through Radio Intercepts and Other Sources." *Yad Vashem Studies* 32: 351-396, 2004.
- [22] *Ibid*, pp. 365f.
- [23] *Ibid*, p. 360.
- [24] *Ibid*, p. 366.
- [25] Bletchley Park Summary Reports ZIP/OS6 of 28 January 1942.
- [26] Terry, *op. cit.*, p. 388.
- [27] Or better stated: the radio communications deciphered at Bletchley Park contain only information regarding mass shootings behind the front, but not regarding mass gassings at Auschwitz (*Oder behutsamer formuliert: Die in Bletchley Park entschlüsselten Funksprüche enthalten nur Informationen zu Masserschießungen hinter der Front, nicht aber zu Massenvergasungen in Auschwitz.*)
- [28] Staatliches Museum Auschwitz, *Sterbebücher von Auschwitz* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995).
- [29] Norbert Frei (ed.), *Darstellungen und Quellen zur Geschichte von Auschwitz: Standort- und Kommandanturbefehle des Konzentrationslagers Auschwitz 1940 – 1945* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000).
- [30] David Bankier (Ed.), *Secret Intelligence and the Holocaust. Collected Essays from the Colloquium at the City University of New York* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2006).

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